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Questioning the notion of ‘authentic’ leadership in education: The perspectives of ‘followers’¹

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This paper is presented at both conferences by Dr Richard Smith on behalf of the five person research team.

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N.B. Caveat: This paper is currently a work in progress and no actual data have been collected and as it stands, therefore, the paper comprises the beginning of a literature review and an outline of the conceptual, theoretical and methodological frameworks. Hence, because of its tentative position as a *work in progress* please do not cite the paper without express permission of Richard Smith at the following email address: richard.smith@nie.edu.sg

Abstract

Authentic leadership is emerging as an alternative perspective on leadership in different organisational settings including education (Bhindi & Duignan, 1997). The authors will draw upon the existent research and commentary on authentic leadership and its relevance to leaders engaged in human service organisations, especially in the field of Education. Notions of authentic leadership are to be found in the disciplines of Nursing, Human Resources and Business and Organisational Development. However, missing/unacknowledged dimensions of the current leadership literature will also be identified with respect to authenticity. For example often the literature is about authentic leadership from the perspectives of leaders themselves, rather than from the perspectives of the ‘followers’. A rationale for this research project is presented outlining the need for empirical research from the viewpoints of practitioner-educators (teachers) as ‘followers’ of authentic leaders. The proposed research methodology is outlined which includes a blend of survey data and focus groups, which the researchers intend to map teacher (i.e. ‘follower’) perceptions of authentic leaders. Specifically, we want to determine the dynamics needed to promote authentic rather than ‘contrived collegiality’ (Hargreaves, 1994). It is contended

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that authentic leaders will empower communities of learners through the creation of vibrant, safe, fulfilling schools.

Keywords: educational leadership; educational policy; schools; ‘authenticity’

Introduction

In the past decade there has been an intense concern about the way organisations are managed and led. Such consternation is partly due to greater public scrutiny and probity about the direction, management, and structures of organisations. It is also substantially due to the collapse of integrity and a feeling of betrayal by organizational leaders. There is an entrenched public perception that the leadership rhetoric does not match workplace reality and therefore a great deal of cynicism and disdain about organisational leaders prevails. This cynicism is fuelled by perceptions of ‘Self’ before ‘service’, profits before public good, deceitful practices and cover-ups, insincerity and superficiality in relationships and obsession with efficiency and outcomes without regard to human cost.

For example, in the USA demands have been made for greater leadership probity and accountability in the wake of the collapse of Enron (May, Chan, Hodges & Avolio, 2003; Currall & Epstein, 2003) while in Australia the Australian Wheat Board (Royal Commission, Cole Inquiry, 2006) and HIH scandals (HIH Royal Commission, 2003) have ignited similar public concern and outcry.

This prevailing context of cynicism and perplexity about falling leadership standards coupled with the increasing complexity of the workplace has impelled the search and call for alternative leadership paradigms that are more values-driven, ethical, credible, compassionate, and people-centred (see also Sinclair, 2007).

In this paper the authors outline a brief literature review to place the current study in context. This is followed by an outline of the methodology proposed study and then the concluding comments.

The beginnings of the values of authenticity in management literature

Referring to Barnard's 1938 book, (Barnard, 1938 cited in Novicevic, Davis, Dorn, Buckley & Brown, 2005, p. 1398) argue that Barnard brings up for the first time the vital importance of the moral code of leadership. These authors further note that Barnard was the first 'management' scholars to formulate a theory of leadership influence by consent of followers (Novicevic et al., 2005, p. 1399). However, more importantly in the context of this paper Barnard emphasises the creative aspects inherent in authenticity. Barnard's approach to leadership according to Novicevic et al., (2005) is conceptualised as a "function of the interaction between leader transformational and authentic agency and the conditions/situation of organisational stability and change" (p. 1401).

Brief literature review

What is provided in this section is a brief outline of some of the literature relating to authentic leadership from around the globe to show its influence in business and management, and human service organisations such as the medical/nursing field and more importantly in education.

Business/management domains

In recent years a variety of perspectives on authenticity and authentic leadership and pointers for more robust research in this area has emanated from scholars at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and other U.S. academics. For example, Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) adopt a moral stance of authenticity arguing that transformational leadership is authentic whereas transactional leadership is unauthentic. However, Price (2003) is critical of this stance arguing that 'it fails to ground a sufficient response to ethical concerns about transformational leadership' (p. 67). Price's counter-argument is that 'leaders sometimes behave immorally precisely because they are blinded by their own values'. Harvey, Martinko and Gardner (2006) drawing on the attribution research argue that this perspective can help 'organisational leaders become aware of their own attribution styles and biases' and could help them adjust and become more authentic. In a systematic critique on the prevalent self-discovery, self-regulating perspectives on authenticity led by Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans and May (2004), Sparrowe (2006) argues that 'the true self is not discovered absent of others, but is constituted in relation to others' (p.421). He argues that 'emphasis on authenticity as 'to thine

own self be true' will be complemented by authenticity disclosed in the regard one holds for others', holding that a narrative perspective would allow more enriching research on authenticity.

By far the majority of literature on authentic leaders in business/management and the development of leaders has come from the USA (see for instance Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Caldwell & Hayes, 2005; Cooper, Scandura & Schriesheim, 2005; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May & Walumbwa, 2005; Ilies, Morgeson & Nahrgang, 2005; Jensen & Luthans, 2006; Johnson, 2008; Michie & Gooty, 2005; Mumford, Antes, Caughron & Friedrich, 2008). However, there are other North American business studies, for example Agashae and Bratton (2001) a Canadian energy company. Other emerging economies such as Columbia (Kronfly, 2006) in the human sciences field, and India in terms of management development are using the authentic leadership concepts (Krishnan, 2003). In terms research studies of authenticity in business leadership some Scandinavia countries such as Finland (Hautala, 2005) and Norway Karap and Helgo (2008) are also using the terms. Closer to home, Sarros, Cooper and Hartican (2006) have utilised the conception of authenticity in leadership in an Australian business study.

Health related domains

The literature authentic leadership issues is not only restricted to international studies in business and management however, there are also studies in England in the health related sphere (see Storr, 2004) and in the USA in the nursing profession (see Kerfoot, 2006a; 2006b).

Motivational domains

In the motivational 'self help' literature Cooper and Sawaf (1997) regard authenticity as an 'energy field' which derives from within a person and conveys stronger meanings to those who engage with them. They suggest that people are capable of increasing their authentic presence and prescribe certain ways of doing so. Similarly, Goffee and Jones (2005) propose three significant ways in which leaders can establish and sustain their authenticity while McGraw (2001) regards authenticity as discovery and restoration of the true 'Self', and Adreinne (2006) laments the ongoing 'syndrome of 'inauthenticity'.

Responses to the crises of cynicism and crisis of confidence

An alternative leadership paradigm that has gained momentum is Authentic Leadership. Proponents of Authentic Leadership argue for higher standards of leadership behaviour and call for greater congruence between what leaders profess and what they do.

In terms of the present study the literature on authentic leadership in education is now briefly outlined.

Educational domains

Like in the business/management sphere a considerable amount of the literature emanates from the USA. In terms of education it is the work of Paul Begley that is most associated with authentic leadership (see Begley, 2001; 2006). Often the values-based literature on authentic leadership has also been attributed to the work of Robert Starratt (2004). In North America philosophers such as Terry (1993), Starratt (2004), and Taylor (1991) argued for authenticity in leadership, canvassing philosophical and ethical understandings of authenticity and leadership².

With reference to education, Begley (2006) proposes three prerequisites to authentic leadership in schools: self-knowledge, a capacity for moral reasoning, and sensitivity to the orientation of others.

Taking an entirely different perspective Pittinsky and Tyson (2005) argue that to date much of the research, critique, philosophical exposition and commentaries, useful as they might be on authentic leadership are normative, polemic, ‘homilies’ or prescriptions for self-improvements and are almost entirely leadership centred. We concur with their assessment

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...the research on authenticity has not, to date, examined leader authenticity from the perspectives of followers. Because the authenticity literature relies predominantly, if not exclusively, on normative arguments, we know little from empirical perspectives about the perceptions of leader’s authenticity among followers. In particular, what cues or markers are used by followers to determine whether a leader is, in fact, authentic?

(Pittinsky & Tyson, 2005)

² See also the work of Blasé and Blasé (2000) in the USA.

In the UK some interesting theorisation around leadership and followership has been undertaken by Thody (2003) and also notions of authenticity by Woods (2007).

Closer to home in Australia, Bhindi and Duignan (1997) called for greater authenticity in leadership to counterbalance and contend with the toxic influence of rampant corporate managerialism and the increasing dehumanising, political expediency, the apparent subterfuge and hypocrisy people experience in their workplaces and private lives (see also Duignan and Bhindi, 1997). The leitmotif of their paradigm centres on ethical behaviour and spirituality. Later, Duignan and his colleagues (2003) investigated ethical behaviour of leaders in service organisations while Bhindi, Gerber and Riley (2002) explored how leaders conceptualise and manifest spirituality in their leadership behaviour and practice. Branson (2005; 2007) has also explored this notion in Catholics schools in Queensland and recently Duignan (2006) has written a whole book about this conceptualisation of ethics and leadership.

In terms of data from Aotearoa/New Zealand Ross Notman has done work in this area (see Notman, 2008). Furthermore, Cardno (2005, cited in Riley and Mulford, 2007) found that followers want leaders who can lead by doing, have a strong and consistent interest in what they are doing, and facilitate dialogue with them about pedagogy and professional practice. These and other studies will guide and inform our research in this area.

Definition

There are numerous definitions of ‘leadership’ and increasing discourse on the meaning of ‘authenticity’ but a definition of ‘authentic leadership’ has proven to be elusive and arguably more potent. As Pittinsky and Tyson (2005) acknowledge -‘what is meant by authentic leadership is not clear, and the constructs are not always clearly articulated.’

We consider ‘authentic leadership’ as a ‘root construct’, which draws upon kindred perspectives/traditions of leadership. For example, Bhindi and Duignan (1997) authentic leadership draws upon ethical, transformational leadership, stewardship, and spirituality. Furthermore, these authors argue that leadership is authentic to the degree that it is ethical, sincere, genuine, and trustworthy in leadership action and interaction. Authentic leaders

uphold honesty and integrity in their everyday dealings and constantly search for ‘True Self’ e.g. self-enhancement/self-transcendence (Schwartz, 1994) and reject actions and interactions that are deceptive, hypocritical, duplicitous and manipulative. Authentic leaders exercise stewardship through mutuality and interdependence and compassion. For such leaders, they argue, authenticity is not accidental or contrived but intentional. Authenticity is also connoted by sensibility to others. Here, Authenticity is seen when one ‘acts in accord with the true self. Expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings’ (Harter, 2002, p. 382).

It may be argued that authentic leadership involves two intermingling forces. Firstly, authentic leadership is the transformation of oneself and others to a higher moral and ethical purpose. It is earned by the leader and bestowed by followers. It is not dependent upon the position, power or authority of the leader but upon the recognised integrity and credibility of the leader overtime. It is a collective process involving leader and followers. Such leaders ‘walk the talk’ in all aspects of their responsibilities and earn the trust of others. Thus authentic leadership is about the integrity of the leader. Secondly, it is the uncompromising adherence to or a quest for a high moral code or ethical standard of conduct. Such a code serves as a mirror and guide to themselves for constant self-reflection in their quest for True Self and transformative learning.

We contend that followers legitimate and bear witness to the extent to which their leaders are really authentic. Unfortunately, ‘because leaders are more visible than followers, most leadership research has focused upon leaders and ignored the role of followers in explaining organizational successes or failure’ (Lussier & Achua, 2007, p. 265).

We advance two significant reasons for undertaking such research. Firstly, that as leadership is legitimated through and by followers it is logical to map the followers’ perceptions of the markers of authentic leadership. Secondly, in line with the literature and practice of distributive leadership, the relationship between leaders and followers could be better understood and enhanced if leaders had a deeper understanding of perceptions of what constitutes authenticity, as held by their followers. Such a research would extend the limited scholarship in the area of authentic leadership from the followers’ perspective. Consequently, we propose to explore the concept of authentic leadership and the markers of authenticity as perceived by workplace followers and choose the school as our research setting.

This research focus of this study will comprise a series of instances (cases) where the focus is on the behaviours of school leaders performing as authentic leaders as perceived by their followers. The nature and function of schools as human service organisations, exemplify ideals of autonomy, collegiality and shared leadership, which are actively sought and vigorously defended by the teaching profession. Hence, the dominant assumptions of control based on industrial and bureaucratic models are regarded as inappropriate and need to be re-examined especially how their followers regard leaders. Also since schools are woven from the same societal fabric as other organisations they cannot remain aloof or escape the ongoing turbulence, scrutiny and discontinuous change in their midst. Nor can they ignore the shifting grounds within their own context. In other words, the implications of the 'kinetic' forces that impinge on school leadership are too strong to ignore.

These forces include:

- Increasing administrative burdens and accountabilities of site based management;
- Growing public sophistication and vocalization of their opinions;
- Professionalization of teachers and the primacy of teachers as leaders;
- Balancing multiple often contradictory expectations, of multiple stakeholders;
- Expanding knowledge base and the rise of expertise;
- Stress of persistent vandalism, student behaviour management and duty of care;
- Leadership burnout and the oncoming crises of succession.

(Bhindi, 2004)

It is clear that school leadership has become too complex and burdensome to be handled through *dictates*, manipulation and appeals to authority. There is an increasing call for school leadership to become more dynamic, open, accountable and authentic (see Bhindi, 2003). While many school leaders claim to be authentic leaders, there is no empirical research on whether these perceptions are shared by their followers

Research questions

This research investigates two central questions:

1. How, if at all, do followers assess the authenticity of their workplace leaders?
2. How, if at all, do followers perceive that leaders can develop authenticity?

Research methodology

While the study utilises *cases* for the sake of managing both geographical and institution(al) based data more conveniently, procedures used can best be described as aligning with a mixed methods methodology which uses both qualitative and quantitative methods (Gorard & Taylor, 2004; Luttrell, 2005; Smith, 2002). Triangulation procedures as described by Keeves (1997) have been factored into the research design and this specifically involves invoking data, investigator and methodological triangulation as appropriate (Wellington, 2000).

The overarching methodology involves a case study evaluation of the schools' as organisations (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998; Bassey, 1999; Burns, 2000; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Smith, 2002; Yin, 1993). [Note: remember that even experts such as Cohen, Manion & Morrison, subscribe to the notion that methodology is the toolbox used for plying the trade and methods are the tools to be used within the trade – Hansen, 2008 (research note)].

Anderson and Arsenault (1998, p. 249) define case studies as 'an empirical investigation ... [and] ... a qualitative form of inquiry that relies on multiple sources of information'. Building on this Marshall and Rossman (2006, p. 56) suggest that case studies, may entail multiple methods – interviews, observations, document analysis, even surveys. The current proposed research draws on most of these methods or variants of them, except observations.

Data collection methods

In a study such as this, documentary analyses and data collection are separate aspects of the one exercise. For this study, it is intended to gather relevant institutional and government materials for documentary analysis, e.g. materials from the ERO (Education Review Office) and from the Quality Assurance Directorate (Schools Division, New South Wales Department of Education and Training, (DoE&T). In addition, relevant website materials policy documents and selected items of literature will be sourced for thematic analysis (e.g. Scott, 2000; May, 1997; Wellington, 2000). It is also intended to gather primary data from three geographical domains (see below).

As an integral aspect of this phase of the research, relevant government and school websites will be scanned for terms associated with 'good' leadership in general and 'authentic'

leadership in particular. Patton (1990) describes this form of research (i.e. documentary analysis) as stemming from written data, usually documents, which yield excerpts, quotations or entire passages from organisational records, official records or publications. Merriam (1998, p. 123) suggests the following procedures should be followed in documentary analyses (her procedures have been italicised and our comments have not):

After assessing the authenticity and nature of documents ... the researcher must adopt some system for coding and cataloguing them. We concur. But in this study, we intend to not only invoke a top down or deductive approach to data management, but we also want to admit scope for an inductive approach whereby data induce codes and subsequent theory.

If possible written documents should be photocopied. Again we concur because that enables investigators to generate preliminary notes. However, we reason, with due regard to the power of computing, that it is better to scan such documentation. It should be scanned in order to transform the data into electronic form so that subsequently, computer aided analyses (e.g. with QSR NVivo 8) can more readily be achieved.

By establishing categories early on for coding, the researcher will have easy access to information in the analysis and interpretation stage. Yet again, we agree but we also note that aside from data retrieval, critical reflection of data is best facilitated by iteratively examining data in a manner that is consistent with an audit trail of thinking. Such data and thinking reviews almost invariably prompt further questions that can be ‘coded on’.

Primary field data will be gathered from both Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand which will enable tentative cross-Tasman comparisons and contrasts to be made. In Australia, data will be gathered in Wollongong, South East NSW and from Armidale, North West NSW. In New Zealand primary data will be gathered from the Rotorua/Whakatane area and from the North Shore City’s schools. Specifically, it is intended to administer an on-line *Questionnaire/Survey* across the four areas, two of which are metropolitan (Wollongong and North Shore City, NZ) and two of which are less urban and thus smaller more rural centres (Rotorua, Whakatane, New Zealand and. Armidale, NSW). It is intended that the on-line

survey would be designed on a platform such as Survey Monkey and that the data analyses would be predominantly descriptive with results being processed via SPSS. There will be a purposive sample of teachers from Catholic, Government/State and Independent schools in each region with: up to four state/government schools selected and a further two schools in each of the other categories the Catholic and Independent sectors. Thus there will be up to eight schools in each of the four city/rural areas for the study and thus up to 32 schools in total.

Subsequently, in-depth semi-structured focus group interviews will occur with a cross-section of teachers across each of the three areas. It is intended to recruit up to two people from each school and to facilitate two focus group sessions per area (these practitioners will be actively involved and mentored by the more experienced researchers). These interviews might broadly be phenomenological in nature (see Seidman, 1998, cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The interviews will be recorded and transcribed for subsequent narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) but the software which will be used will be QSR NVivo 8.

In summary, this mixed methods series of case studies will span rural and metropolitan settings, will gather qualitative and quantitative data and is, at best, exploratory in nature. It is not ambitious task because it only completes an initial exploration of a leadership construct that we believe to be important.

Conclusions

In theory, authentic leadership represents a conscious commitment to core, enduring values. If, AL, is nurtured and sustained by compassion, honesty and dignity in leadership behaviour and interpersonal relationship. In schools as complex workplaces, we need both authentic teachers and authentic leaders. In this proposed study, we intend to determine whether or not (and to what extent if at all), authentic leaders, are critical to the success of the school's core business. It has been well established that when people know that they are valued, they also feel empowered and become able to accept responsibility and ownership for whatever soul, tone, wellbeing and successes occur within the workplace. Moreover, it has also been shown that such a workplace culture is not accidental – rather – it is intentional. Only by creating a caring, concerned and compassionate environment in our schools can school leaders provide the ignition and compression needed to drive quality teaching and learning, and the necessary

stretch for improvement and innovation (Bhindi, 2004). And if authentic leadership is an essential dimension of such a process, it is intended that this study will indicate that this is so. There is much work to do in actually collecting and analysing the data yet we believe this is a valuable trans-Tasman study which will add new insights to this interesting arena.

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